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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001058

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SUBJECT: KARZAI MAKES "SURPRISE" VISIT TO HELMAND

REF: KABUL 1045

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Neumann for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) President Karzai's March 29 short-notice (for security reasons) visit to Helmand was well received but much less impressive than his December visit to Kandahar which lasted three days. Karzai repeated several themes during his four hour visit to Lashkar Gah which included meetings with provincial leaders, students, and educators, a speech at a mosque, and lunch with a smaller group of 50 elders. En route back to Kabul, he received a briefing at RC-South on Operation Achilles from MG Van Loon. In his speech and meetings, Karzai urged Helmand to take greater responsibility for its own security and asked more men to join the ANSF. He tied security to development, stressed the importance of the Kajaki dam, and set out the political context for ISAF military operations getting underway in Helmand. Karzai touched on poppy production but only lightly, asking why it was needed when it was killing Afghans. Governor Wafa questioned the visit's impact since few influential elders from the districts were involved. Wafa may already be burned out. Karzai understands he needs to look for a new Governor and engage more politically in the province. This trip was possible only with logistical and security support from ISAF, CSTC-A, the State-funded Karzai Protective Detail with DS liaison, and INL helicopter assets. END SUMMARY

Four Hours in Helmand  
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2. (C) On March 29, President Karzai made a "surprise" visit to Lashkah Gar in Helmand province. He was accompanied by Defense Minister Wardak and several MPs. His first stop was the Governor's office where he met with Provincial leaders for about 20 minutes. He then moved to a local school where the met with students and educators for about 45 minutes. Karzai had insisted on visiting the school as "the children

were the future of Afghanistan" and education has been the GOA's primary theme for Now Ruz (New Year). He moved then to the main event at a local mosque where 400-500 were gathered for the President's speech. The mosque event lasted approximately two hours. Distinguished elders were later invited to a lunch at a local hotel where Karzai continued to speak on various themes. Following the lunch, he retired to a private room with only a handful of elders. The event lasted about one hour. At the transit stop at Kandahar Air Field (KAF), RC-S Commander MG Van Loon briefed Karzai for 25 minutes on Operation Achilles.

#### Themes

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13. (C) Karzai told the shura at the mosque that the people of Helmand needed to take more responsibility for their own security in order to allow development to proceed. (Note: This remark was perceived by some Afghan participants as coming disturbingly close to calling for the reestablishment of local militias.) He stressed the importance of Kajaki ("even Iran will benefit as it claims more water from the Helmand River"), a project he hoped he will be able to officially celebrate. He pointed to disagreements between tribes and interest groups as a major source of insecurity. Warlords and tribal disputes were destroying the country, he said. If Afghans wanted schools, bridges, and roads, they would need to unite, not fight one another. Karzai put out his hand to those Taliban who wanted to reconcile. He said the excesses of the Taliban -- hanging women and beheadings -- were not part of Afghan tradition and called upon Mullah Omar to distance himself from these extreme acts. He asked rhetorically why Mullah Omar was silent when these acts were

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not being ordered by him.

14. (C) Karzai told the crowd he was not happy that international forces were needed in Afghanistan but said the country could not be secure without them. If they were no longer needed, they would go home tomorrow, he stated. He mentioned he saw poppy flowers when landing at Lashkah Gar and asked, "Why was it needed when it was killing so many Afghans?" Employing a bit of irony, he congratulated the people of Helmand for being able to get rich from poppy (reftel).

15. (C) The President called on the youth of Helmand to join the ANA and ANP to provide their own local security. He asked why youngsters were going to work in Pakistan instead. Karzai said, "I can count with my fingers the number of recruits from Helmand, you are part of Afghanistan and you owe your country". One elder responded and criticized ISAF for setting up camps everywhere while not providing security for ordinary citizens, only for themselves. It was then time for prayer and the meeting ended.

16. (C) At the smaller shura with about 50 elders, Karzai repeated similar themes: join the ANSF; forgive those who became your enemies; Kajaki is essential; tell me what you think of the military operation; and no more poppy next year. Again, there was only one response from the elders who made a critical remark about local governance. Someone recited a poem of praise to Karzai, the meeting ended, and the entourage left for Kandahar.

#### Reactions

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18. (C) In his debrief to PRT Commander and TF Helmand Deputy Commander, Governor Wafa highlighted the main themes of Karzai's visit: NATO are our guests; Afghans need to stand up and fight the insurgents; we need to reject poppy; and we must support Kajaki. Wafa admitted to being nervous about Karzai's visit but did not elaborate. He said he was not terribly positive about the turnout of elders, calling them

"IDPs" because it was the usual crew who turn up at shuras, i.e., those who live in town and are familiar with the messages coming out of the GOA. In general, Wafa was not positive about the impact of the visit, given that few influential elders from the districts were present. He said only one "real" elder from Sangin attended and added that if others from Sangin had come, they would have been under threat upon their return.

¶9. (U) All government and independent TV and radio stations, as well as other Afghan media outlets -- including most notably the Pajhwok Afghan News service -- aired coverage of President Karzai's trip through March 31. In addition to footage from and commentary on the trip in general, reports noted Karzai's March 29 remarks to tribal elders on the violence in the South compared to the North and his calls for local people to cooperate with GOA efforts and for the people of Afghanistan as a whole to join hands with the government to ensure progress and reconstruction. That call echoed one of the central spring campaign messages being promoted by the GOA's NC3 (National Communication Coordination Center), i.e., where people help maintain peace and progress, the government is delivering services and development.

¶10. (U) The press reporting on the visit, however, did not provide a clear picture of public reaction. One report highlighted the reaction to Karzai's speech was positive, with laughter and clapping but noted the reaction on the street was mixed. One local resident is reported to have said he was happy Karzai came to Helmand to see firsthand the bad security situation and hoped the visit would bring about changes. Another resident was more critical, saying "just visiting is not going to help... I would like him to make Helmand stable." One individual reportedly complained that

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he wasn't able to open his bread shop because all the roads were closed. "We don't need him to come here, as he won't change a thing. We need a prosecutor down here; he should come and fire all the corrupt officials".

Meeting at RC-South  
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¶11. (C) In a small meeting at KAF with ISAF RC-S Commander MG Van Loon, Karzai was positive about ISAF, worried about ineffective governance in the South, and made promises about getting more ANSF to the province. Both agreed that Sangin was key to stability. Van Loon assesses the engagement by Karzai as a positive that will help move governance forward in Helmand. He believed the visit achieved the effects we wanted.

Karzai's Debrief to Ambassador  
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¶12. (C) Upon his return from Helmand, the Ambassador spoke to Karzai briefly about his trip. Karzai showed that he had clearly grasped the need for a political strategy and is determined to undertake one himself. He wants to go back to Helmand once or twice more although a timeframe was not mentioned. He sees massive unhappiness of the population with the "former commanders". On the up side, he believes there is "a lot we can work with" to respond to the political needs of the people. He said there was strong support for Kajaki. He reinforced the need to do both force and politics and to keep the two linked. However, Karzai now sees Governor Wafa as burned out and having no energy to carry the ball. Karzai says he must find a new governor. In the meantime, he plans to bring Wafa and some others to Kabul to meet with Helmand parliamentarians to continue strategizing on how best to respond to political needs.

¶13. (C) Ambassador's Comment: At the moment, I am comfortable that Karzai is fully seized with the need for political engagement in Helmand. He will, as he did just after the

visit, sort his way through by intuition and the dynamic of his relations with those he talked to (not scripts written by foreigners). It is the way he is most comfortable and, in fact, the only way he will work. We will probe to help him sort out his thinking, debate questionable aspects, and find ways to support continued engagement.

NEUMANN